.15

TWENTY QUESTIONS on

PARISH HALL ENTERTAINMENTS

Stage Management

By C. E. HOWELL

THE LIBRARY
THE CATHEDRAL OF ST. JOHN THE DIVINE
CATHEDRAL HEIGHTS
NEW YORK 25, N. Y.

6 6d.

TWENTY QUESTIONS SERIES

Aids to Parochial Church Councillors and other Church workers in handy form. Each booklet covers the salient points of its subject by means of question and answer.

Twenty Questions

1. ON CHURCH FINANCE
   By Prebendary STANLEY ELEY, former Secretary of the London Diocesan Fund.

2. ON PARISH ORGANIZATION
   By the Rev. C. R. FORDER, Author of *The Parish Priest at Work.*

3. ON CHURCH MUSIC
   By GERALD H. KNIGHT, Mus.B., of the Royal School of Church Music.

4. ON PAGEANTS IN CHURCH
   (Carols, Tableaux, Incidental Music, etc.)
   By C. E. HOWELL.

5. ON FILMSTRIPS
   (In School and Parish.)
   By the Rev. G. L. WHEELER, Secretary of the C. of E. Films Commission (Northern Province).

6. ON PARISH HALL ENTERTAINMENTS
   (Stage Management.)
   By C. E. HOWELL.

7. ON SUNDAY SCHOOLS
   By CLARICE M. KNOWLES.

8. ON FLOWERS IN CHURCH
   By IRENE CAUDWELL.

6d. each.

A. R. MOWBRAY & CO. LIMITED

TWENTY QUESTIONS
ON
PARISH HALL ENTERTAINMENTS
(Stage Management)

ANSWERED BY

C. E. HOWELL

A. R. MOWBRAY & Co. LIMITED
LONDON AND OXFORD

First published in 1950

Printed in Great Britain by
A. R. Mowbray & Co. Limited, London and Oxford
0281

INTRODUCTION

A CONCERT or show is first and foremost an entertainment for the public who have paid to come in. Unless they are charmed, amused, and interested the concert is a failure. It is useless to blame the audience, saying that they do not care for this, or are interested only in that. Audiences are interested in anything that is well done. They are bored by the inexpert, the hesitant, the half-heard, and the dimly-seen. A hastily gathered group of willing performers and a rough list of what they are able to do are not sufficient warrant for rushing out to sell the tickets.

Unless you are willing to spend considerable time and trouble in making the entertainment a good one, you would do better to abandon the idea. When you have roughed out your programme go through it item by item-asking yourself the twenty questions which follow. The attempt to find the answers will help to improve your entertainment and to increase the enjoyment of your audience.

QUESTIONS ANSWERED

BUILDING THE ITEMS

1. Have you a series of 'items' or of 'acts'?
2. What use are you making of costume?
3. Are you going to use a chorus?
4. Are you going to use make-up?

BUILDING THE PROGRAMME

5. What is the best opening item?
6. How will you close the first half?
7. Does the second half echo the first?
8. How will you close the whole entertainment?
9. Can you find a connecting link?

USING THE CURTAINS

10. What kind of background have you?
11. Are the curtains arranged to the best advantage?
12. If you have front curtains, how will you use them?

USING SCENERY

13. How much scenery is necessary?
14. Can you use any 'ground-rows'?
15. Must you use a 'box-set'?

ARRANGING THE LIGHTING

16. Are footlights worth while?
17. Do you need extra top lighting?
18. Do you need any local lighting?

PRINTING THE PROGRAMME

19. What *must* go on the programme?
20. Are there any *essential* announcements?

POSTSCRIPT

BUILDING THE ITEMS

1. *Have you a series of 'items' or of 'acts'?*

An amateur speaks about an 'item' from a 'repertoire.' A professional talks about an 'act.' This is more than mere jargon. The difference is that between a preliminary sketch and a finished picture. The simplest 'item' can be built up (with costume, lighting, scenery, and a chorus) into the most elaborate 'act.' This can be overdone, but most amateur contributions would be better for the added interest and support of a little building-up.

2. *What use are you making of costume?*

Your artists are bound to appear in some sort of costume, if only in modern afternoon dress. This may help or hinder the performance. A frock with pronounced Spanish characteristics will not help an Irish song to 'get across.' There are two approaches to the question, and they should not be mixed in the same programme. You may costume each 'act' in detail. This is interesting for the audience and fun for the artists, but it is expensive. You may *suggest* the costumes by a careful choice of accessories (hats, shawls, fans, etc.). This can be quite as effective if the basic costume of each artist is simple in design and quiet in colour, and it is much less expensive.

3. *Are you going to use a chorus?*

A chorus will:

(*a*) give confidence to a soloist not used to public performances;

(*b*) use the services of many willing people who would lack the courage, or the ability, to perform solo;

(*c*) add interest to the items in which it is used;

(*d*) enable you to alternate full scenes with those employing only one or two persons; and

(*e*) give you a chance to build up a really good finish to the first half of your programme, and an impressive ending to the whole entertainment. It is worth considering in some detail.

4. *Are you going to use make-up?*

The chief use of 'straight' make-up is to give back to the faces of the performers the natural high-lights and shadows which the carefully balanced stage lighting levels out, making the faces flat and expressionless. Hence, on the concert platform just enough should be used to make the faces appear natural from the back of the hall, under the lighting which is going to be used for the performance.

BUILDING THE PROGRAMME

5. *What is the best opening item?*

The 'Here we are again!' of the Pierrot troupe was founded on a long experience of pleasing the public. To open with a quiet solo, or a serious recitation, is a mistake. It will almost certainly be interrupted by late-comers. It will not put the audience in the right mood for an evening's fun. The opening number should have a swing to it, and should use as many of the performers as is convenient. It should be short, colourful, and cheerful.

6. *How will you close the first half?*

This is the place for your biggest and best number. If you put it at the beginning it will be spoilt by the late-comers. If you save it for the end, those with early buses to catch will either miss it or interrupt it. If you set it in the middle of either half it will dwarf the remaining items. Keep your most effective costumes, your cleverest lighting effects, and your best grouping for this moment, and fill your stage. The moment you reach the climax of the number, bring down the curtain and let the audience have an interval in which to tell one another how much they are enjoying themselves.

7. *Does the second half echo the first?*

If the first half has been well arranged, and the second half echoes it, each item in the second part will call to mind its opposite number earlier in the evening and the whole entertainment will take on a definite shape which will help to make it memorable.

8. *How will you close the whole entertainment?*

Closing items are as liable to interruption as opening ones. Do not save an important piece for this moment. This is the time when the audience can say 'Thank you' to the artists. Try to get them all on naturally for the final curtain. Some companies almost repeat the opening number, which has the effect of setting the whole show in a kind of frame. Do not have separate curtains for the principal artists. Every one has contributed to the success of the show. Let every one share in the applause.

9. *Can you find a connecting link?*

With all the care in the world there is still a certain sameness about most Church entertainments which arises from the nature of the items it is possible to include in the programme. This may be overcome in part by finding a central idea which will link the items into a connected whole. You may journey across space, setting your scenes successively in England, France, Italy, Egypt, India, China, Mexico, and home again. You may journey through time, showing the Tudor, the Stuart, the Regency, and the Victorian periods. You may have a garden-party, or a country house week-end. The possibilities are wide, but you must find one that fits your already chosen items. You must not find the idea first, and then force your items into the mould.

USING THE CURTAINS

10. *What kind of background have you?*

Many small stages are hung with curtains. These often form an excellent background, but it is well to inspect the artists *in costume* against it, especially with the stage lights on, and from the back of the hall. If it is found that some of the costumes fade into the background, try a change of lighting. If this is ineffective, try edging some of the costumes with a contrasting band, or changing the colour of the accessories. As a last resort, hang broad bands of coloured material in front of the curtains, like pillars, but avoid too fierce a contrast. It is the artists that should catch the eye—not the background.

11. *Are the curtains arranged to the best advantage?*

Most small stages have only one set of curtains—apart from those forming the background—and these are hung at the front of the stage. This is not the best arrangement. Try to have them hung about one-third of the way up-stage. Solo items can then be played in front of them whilst larger scenes are being set behind. Variety in the size of stage used is also achieved, and long waits between the items are avoided. At the end of the first half, and of the whole show, the cast can move up-stage and the curtains close in front of them, opening in the usual manner for them to take a bow.

12. *If you have front curtains, how will you use them?*

Constant raising and lowering of the front curtains is bad management. It chops the entertainment up into a number of snippets, it allows the attention of the audience to wander too frequently, and it destroys the effectiveness that the movement of these curtains should have. Lower them only at the end of the first half, and to close the entertainment. If you have centre curtains, use these for separating the items. It not, try to overlap the scenes so that there are no gaps. If this is impossible, leave an empty stage for a few *seconds*. When you do use the front curtains, be sure to bring them down on a climax, not after a weak moment.

USING SCENERY

13. *How much scenery is necessary?*

It is possible to give a very good show with no scenery at all. Given a plain, neutral-coloured background, and costumes either correct in detail or well suggested with carefully chosen accessories, then the use of one or two properties will allow the audience to build the scene for themselves. A settee will suggest a drawing-room, a green iron chair a park. Try to find the one piece which will define the locality unmistakably.

14. *Can you use any 'ground-rows'?*

If you feel that a little more definition is still required in some of the scenes, then use 'ground-rows.' These are small pieces of scenery which will stand up by themselves, and which can easily be moved on and off stage—a lamp-post, an ornamental bush in a tub, a hedge, a railing, a gate, and so on. These are particularly useful in suggesting outdoor scenes. Interiors are usually better suggested by one or two pieces of furniture.

15. *Must you use a 'box-set'?*

Box-sets, built up of flats, are a handicap in concert work and should be avoided if possible. They severely limit the possibility of changes of scene. If you have a centre curtain, it may be possible to draw this, and suggest the new scene by means of ground-rows. It may be possible to arrange for a drop curtain. At the best, it will still be necessary for you to set most of your items in the scene provided by the box-set.

ARRANGING THE LIGHTING

16. *Are footlights worth while?*

Footlights have several uses:

(*a*) they separate the stage-world from that of every-day and help to frame the picture;

(*b*) they balance the top lighting which, if used alone, is apt to throw heavy, distorting shadows;

(*c*) they help to light that part of the stage which projects beyond the range of the top lighting.

Thus, it is well to have them if possible. If it is quite impossible, the front part of the stage must be lit by means of floods, and low lights must be fixed in the wings to balance the top lighting.

17. *Do you need extra top lighting?*

You may find your stage equipped with battens to carry two or three rows of lights, or you may find just one or two ordinary ceiling lights. In the first case you need not worry, you will have plenty of light as long as you remember to check the lamps and holders beforehand. In the second case, and every time you wish to add to a circuit, call in your local electrician and ask him whether it is safe to double the number of bulbs by means of two-way adaptors, and whether anything can be done by means of reflectors to throw all the light on to the stage.

18. *Do you need any local lighting?*

The only way to find out whether the lighting is satisfactory is to costume one of your big numbers, make up the artists, and examine them under the lighting, from the back of the hall. If the details are not clear you need extra light. It is sometimes possible to fix reflectors on the first row of hall lights and to tilt these so that they shine on to the stage without blinding the performers. Biscuit tins with a lamp-holder screwed through the bottom of each make excellent floods, and they can be plugged into any light socket by means of flex, and suspended to shine at any angle. It is dangerous, however, to have loose flex lying about the stage and care should be taken to loop it up out of harm's way.

PRINTING THE PROGRAMME

19. *What* must *go on the programme?*

Most progammes are overloaded. Simplify yours by limiting the centre pages to those facts which the audience *must* know if they are to enjoy the entertainment properly. Remember that these words will have to be read often in dim light and in hasty glimpses. Make them bold and easy to read, and have all the information visible at one opening. If you must print extra reading matter, put it on the back page where it can be read during the interval.

20. *Are there any* essential *announcements?*

An audience presents a ready-made target for appeals and a convenient receptor for announcements of future intentions. It is most unwise to use it for either purpose. The people have come to enjoy the show. If it is good, they will come to any other events you organize. If it is bad, your announcements will add to their boredom. The place for such matters is either on posters in the entrance hall, or on the back sheet of the programme. The only announcement that should be made from the stage is one which concerns a change in the programme as printed.

POSTSCRIPT

For plays, for pageants, for choral services, for oratorios, we rehearse long and hard. Do we rehearse for other entertainments? We should. If the programme is to run smoothly with the proper music at the right tempo and the repeats in the right places, with the scenes following one another quickly and surely, and with the curtain and lighting changes expertly handled—then rehearsals are certainly necessary. Some items may need only a quick run-through. Others may need half a dozen or more rehearsals. The whole programme must be covered at a dress rehearsal. This should differ from a performance only in the absence of an audience.

Your greatest asset is variety. Your biggest handicap is lack of speed.

FROM MOWBRAYS' LIST

THE ANGLICAN WAY

A Plain Guide for the Intelligent Layman.
By the late Canon VERNEY JOHNSTONE.
Third Impression. 5*s.*

THE PADRE IS YOUR FRIEND

By Canon LEWIS LLOYD, formerly Chaplain to the Forces. With a Foreword by the Chaplain-General.
Helpful words to young men joining the Forces. A little book to be given or lent to those called up for the Navy, Army, or Air Force. 2*s.* 6*d.*

A HANDBOOK FOR CHURCHWARDENS AND PAROCHIAL CHURCH COUNCILLORS

By KENNETH MACMORRAN, K.C., Chancellor of the Dioceses of Chichester, Ely, St. Albans, and Guildford.
Twenty-first Edition. 2*s.* 6*d.*

A SIMPLE CHURCH DICTIONARY

Short, clear, and accurate definitions of religious and ecclesiastical terms commonly (and often very loosely) used in books and sermons. 4*d.*

I WANT TO LIVE!

A Handbook of Christian Faith and Practice from the standpoint of the Anglican Church to-day.
By the Rev. J. N. THOMPSON.
Cloth, 6*s.*

THE VESTMENTS

What they are and what they mean. With 14 Illustrations drawn by C. O. Skilbeck. 1*s.*

A. R. MOWBRAY & CO. LIMITED